

# Black Widows, Sexual Predators, and the Reality of Female Serial Killers

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## Abstract

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The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the minds of female serial killers, and attempt to create a typology appropriate for understanding their unique psychology. Through an analysis of various mental illnesses, environmental contributors and evolutionary mechanisms, the author highlights the various differences in the minds of male and female serial killers. The author then uses two case studies (Nannie Doss and Aileen Wuornos) to highlight the inadequacies with the current typological standard (the Holmes and DeBurger typology) and provides insight into the minds of these two serial killers. A new hybridized typological system is then suggested merging the Holmes and DeBurger model with the motivational model.

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## Introduction

Lizzie Borden took an axe  
And gave her mother forty whacks.  
When she saw what she had done,  
She gave her father forty-one.  
-anonymous

As long as people have been on this planet, they have been killing one another. For most people, however, murder is disturbing to contemplate and unfathomable as a potential action. Nonetheless, over the course of human history we see outliers: people who not only kill, but choose to take life again and again and again. These killing machines--serial killers--are rightly or wrongly, most often assumed to be males.

Violent behavior (particularly gendered violence like domestic abuse) is more often attributed to men over women. Moreover, women are usually portrayed as victims rather than aggressors (Feder & Potter, 2018). In the journal of *Social and Cultural Geography*, human geographers Barney Warf and Cynthia Waddell remark, “[t]he idea that a woman could be capable of killing flies in the face of deeply patriarchal notions of women’s ostensibly ‘natural’ compassion and tenderness” (Warf & Waddell, 2002). While statistically most serial killers are male, our biases blind us to understanding violence perpetrated by women. For example, we assume that women are motivated to commit murder for the same reasons that men commit murder. Conversely, we hold that certain types of murder should not be attributable to women because of their role as the “gentler” sex. But assumptions like these are ultimately unhelpful for understanding the reality of female homicidal behavior. Take Lizzy Borden, who famously killed her parents. She was ultimately acquitted despite strong evidence, because of society’s notion that a woman is incapable of cold blooded murder. While Borden’s trial was over 125 years ago, our gender based biases persist and potentially undermine justice for victims.

In the United States, serial killings account for less than 1% of all murders, and at any given time the FBI estimates that there are only 25-50 serial killers operating throughout the country (Kaste, 2015). While these numbers appear small, according to the *Casper Star-Tribune*, only 1/2 of serial killers are caught within a year of their first murders (Breed, 2005). This means that at any given time, dozens of serial killers remain at large. But how many of these killers are female?

According to the Radford University/FGCU database, between 1990 and 2016, 93.5% of apprehended American serial killers were male; while only 6.5% of apprehended serial killers are female, that number is not statistically insignificant (Aamodt, 2016). Moreover, the statistics only include convicted serial killers. Because so little is known about female serial killers and because the research on the subject is limited, it is certainly possible that the number of female serial killers is higher than it initially appears. The gap between the current statistics and reality may or may not be significant. However, evidence on the comparative rates of serial murder between males and females internationally indicate a much higher rates of female committed serial homicide: approximately 83.9% male to 16.1% female (Aamodt). Perhaps foreign women are more bloodthirsty than their American counterparts, or foreign police agencies could be more inclined to investigate or even frame women in cases of serial murder. Regardless, the suggestion that women in other countries are over twice as likely as women in America to be responsible for serial murders seems a little far fetched. One researcher out of Penn State Harrisburg has looked at female serial killers from an evolutionary standpoint and posits that there are likely far more female serial killers out there who have never been recorded or captured on the basis that society tends to underestimate women (Kozlowska, 2019).

Nonetheless, the percent of female serial killers has actually declined in America since the 1900s, when almost 38% of serial killers were women. Why the drop? Female serial killing is often linked to financial gain; whether it is murdering a series of wealthy husbands, or receiving insurance proceeds after the tragic deaths of relatives, greed has been the impetus behind a number of so called *black widows*. With the improvement of technology, greater access to education, and rise in female employment, such desperate measures have become more scarce as women achieve greater degrees of economic independence and equality (Watts, 2018). However, even with the reduction over time in female serial killing the fact that almost 40% of serial killers in the U.S. used to be female shows that serial killing is hardly just a boy's club.

American media, police, and society often assume that when murder happens, the perpetrator is male. Unfortunately, this assumption may also lead investigations astray. Most murder victims are acquainted with their murderer; as of 2011, the FBI had found that 54.3% of victims were killed by someone they knew (acquaintance, neighbor, friend, boyfriend, etc.), and 24.8% of victims were slain by family members (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). By immediately dismissing mothers, girlfriends or other associates as suspects, crucial evidence may be overlooked allowing perpetrators to continue killing without suspicion.

Some limited attempts have been made to understand female serial killers. However, these efforts have been infrequent and have not had the same statistical support as the studies regarding their male counterparts (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1999). Outside of the scant scientific research, a number of commonly held beliefs about female killers exist, expressed in petty crime novels and tawdry films. Literature and media typically put female violent offenders into boxes: the femme fatale, the man-hating revenge killer, or even the manipulated innocent. According to

Belinda Morrissey, a lecturer in sociology at Charles Sturt University, female killers are deprived agency by three main techniques: “vilification or monsterization, mythification, and victimism”.

These categories are derivative and hardly scientific. Still, they do illustrate how our society views female perpetrated violence. Female murderers are either hypersexual deviants with a desire to dominate their male victims, vengeful feminists looking to punish men who abused them, or innocent girls who fall under the sway of a dominant male figure. These categories provide very little room for humanization or nuance; female killers are either victims of their gender, or rebels against gender-imposed restrictions. Accordingly, the question becomes how do we better understand female serial killers without making them out to be either victims or mythical witches. Thus, a more scientific system of classification needs to be devised to examine the realities of how female serial killers behave and what drives their individual behavior.

It is my intent in this paper to examine what makes female serial killers neurologically and behaviorally distinct from their male counterparts. This project will outline a baseline analysis of how serial killing is understood from a psychological perspective and look at how psychological traits play into existing typologies. Where literature is available, I will discuss the neurological and psychological underpinnings of female perpetrated violence. From there, I will look at the cases of Nannie Doss and Aileen Wuornos. Using these cases, I examine existing typologies to see where they succeed and fail in capturing the essence of female serial killing. Specifically, I examine Doss and Wuornos’s victimology, backgrounds, and psychological profiles. Finally, I suggest a more comprehensive typological system for female serial killers, and consider the future of female murder.





# Chapter 1: The Problem with Profiling

## Profiling and Serial Killer Typologies

Traditional criminal profiling uses two categories to try and understand criminal behavior: organized and disorganized. The organized killer is the kind of mind imagined by Arthur Conan Doyle, a villain fit for a Sherlock Holmes novel. He is highly intelligent and systematic, planning his kills in advance, often choosing his victims days before the actual attack. The bodies of those murdered by organized killers are rarely publicly displayed; rather, organized killers try to conceal their work. When displays are made, the organized killer makes sure they are discovered when and how the killer wants them to be seen. Disorganized killers, on the other hand, have lower IQs and are driven by impulse (Types of Serial Killers, 2017). Their victims may have characteristics in common--a common victimology--but the victims of disorganized killers are chosen more randomly, as kills of opportunity. Disorganized killers are violent and antisocial, with their social oddity usually being clearly perceived by any acquaintances. Disorganized killers therefore have few close personal relationships as they are unable to maintain any facade of normality (Johns et al., 2005). This dual classification system was intended to apply to all killers, regardless of sex, method and motive. However, this system has ultimately been found lacking in terms of understanding the motivations that drive homicidal behavior (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1999).

This model, developed in the late 1980s by the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit (BSU), is familiar to anyone who has watched any procedural crime drama. Nonetheless, this typology is not perfect, with BSU members noting that "...there are no situations where the organized and disorganized offenders are mutually exclusive", thus prompting the creation of a mixed category for serial killers whose behaviors exist somewhere in the middle of the continuum (Morton,

Tillman, & Gaines, 2015). Even so the typology is flawed, developed from a series of interviews later found to be methodologically unsound. The interviews that formed the bases of the typology were not randomized, and the study was based on a sample of only 36 interviews (Canter et al., 2004). Other criticism suggest that the typology is not a psychological distinction supported by science, but merely “commonsensical day-to-day speculation about differences between people” (Canter, 2001, as cited in Canter et al., 2004).

In order to develop a more rigorous typology, Ronald Holmes and James DeBurger’s motivational model was created, delineating between four motive types:

1. Visionary or psychotic;
2. Mission-oriented;
3. Hedonistic (either lust oriented, thrill oriented, or comfort killers); and
4. Power/control oriented.

Difficulties with the Holmes and DeBurger model include a lack of empirical data, with studies relying on self-reported information, and categories sharing overlapping characteristics (Morton, Tillman, & Gaines). Nonetheless, this model can prove useful in understanding serial killers on the basis of their motivations.

The Holmes and DeBurger model and the organized/disorganized model, while useful in some regards, share a universal and glaring oversight. Not only do they fail to differentiate between female and male killers, but the data the models are based on typically does not contain even a single female killer. Therefore both models assume that motivations for serial killers are homogenous across gender. However, interviews and other research has indicated that women often have starkly different paths to murderous behavior, tending to kill family members more frequently than male serial killers, to be older than male serial killers, and tending to come from

a lower socioeconomic class (Keeney, 1994). A 2015 paper also suggested that 39% of female serial killers worked in health care, and that female serial killers usually remain in one location across murders and used methods less outwardly violent, like poison (Harrison, 2015, as cited in Kozłowska, 2019). Thus, to extend these models to women is not only presumptuous, but a potentially fatal oversight when it comes to criminal investigations.

Rather than develop a unique typology for understanding female killers, it has historically been easier to just rely on general statistics. Many studies suggest that female serial killers are more cautious than male serial killers, and kill those closer to them (Keeney). Whether it is fictional tales like the greek tragedy of *Medea*, or the tale of Lizzie Borden, the most famous female serial killers have killed close to home, usually relatives. Women also chose more secretive means of bloodshed whenever possible, preferring to use poison (Wilson & Hilton, 1998). This is not to say women don't use more opaque methods of murder: 20% of female serial killers employ shooting, 16% suffocation, 11% stabbing, and 5% drowning (Educated Attempts, 2008). In other instances, efforts are taken to disguise murder as natural death, as is often the case with angel of death murders.

Ultimately, these statistics are useful but not necessarily insightful into the minds of the individual. Rather, these statistics turn all female serial killers into a monolith, without nuance or distinction. When a female killer does not conform to the traditional assumptions about behavior, their activity looks irrational and unpredictable. There is no space in these kind of broad swaths to understand women like Aileen Wuornos, who murdered seven men in Florida, shooting them at point blank range. It is therefore necessary to move beyond what the “average” female serial killer does and try and distinguish between variations in method, victimology, and motive.

In *Murders Most Rare*, the authors established what has become known as the Kelleher Typology. The book explicitly discussed the inadequacy of the organized-disorganized typology created by Ressler, Burgess and Douglass in *Sexual Homicide: Patterns and Motives*. More concretely, the book attempted to establish nine types of female serial killers.

Preliminarily, Kelleher distinguishes between killers who acted in partnerships and killers who acted independently; this distinction speaks to the common occurrence of dominant male-submissive female serial killing partnerships. Nonetheless, Kelleher recognizes that this division may not be sufficiently informative about the psychology of female serial killers. Thus, Kelleher establishes a nine point system of classification. While inherently subjective, his system was designed to specifically study the motivation of female serial killers. Kelleher's categories are:

1. *Team Killer:*

According to Kelleher, team killers represent about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of all female serial killers and include three types: male-female, female-female, and family teams. Among these, male-female teams are the most common, and these teams often invoke a sexual component to their crimes. However, the women in this category often never directly participate in these murders.

2. *Question of sanity:*

These murderers engage in random serial offenses without a clear motive, and are eventually charged as legally insane, or their murders can be directly linked to a psychological disorder. While Kelleher defines this as a completely distinct category, there may be some natural overlap with other groups. For my purpose, this category will exclude diagnoses of psychopathy and borderline personality disorder and will only pertain to

mental disorders which compromise the individual's ability to gauge reality and judge moral behavior.

3. *Black Widow:*

Black widows are killers who systematically kill multiple spouses, partners, or other family members; they are intelligent, manipulative, highly organized, and plan their activities. Black widows use persuasion to attract their victims, and go through a long cycle of killing, sometimes waiting years before finding a new victim. Poison is the most common means of murder for black widows, who often try to mask their murders as illnesses in order to collect insurance proceeds. Notably, black widow killers may overlap with Profit or Crime killers (type 7 below).

4. *Angel of Death:*

Angels of death systematically kill persons who are in their care for some form of medical attention. They often kill in a localized setting, like a nursing home or hospital, disguising their murder as a medical tragedy. These killers are motivated by power, enjoying their ability to offer either life-sustaining or life-ending treatment. While these characters are organized, they tend to be braggadocious and often have short careers as a result.

5. *Sexual Predator:*

Solo female sexual predators are incredibly rare. In the context of his typology, Kelleher used cases from countries other than the United States and also made speculations regarding Aileen Wuornos. Female sexual

predators are usually middle aged, geographically mobile, and have a fantasy driven compulsion to kill.

6. *Revenge:*

Female revenge serial killers are rare since most revenge killers engage in a one-time crime of passion. What makes the revenge serial killer different is that they are driven by a deeper, more overwhelming anger, bordering upon the pathological, to exact some sort of comeuppance. Thus, revenge serial killers have very specific victimologies.

7. *Profit or Crime:*

Profit or crime killers are highly intelligent, resourceful, and utterly without remorse. These killers may work for broader crime organizations, or set up localized scam operations to rob and murder victims. There have been no known cases of female killers of this category in the U.S. In order to constitute a profit or crime killer exclusively, they must not meet the criteria applied to black widows.

8. *Unexplained:*

Unexplained killers are the catch all for those whose crimes can't otherwise be explained by the perpetrators, nor by the police.

9. *Unsolved:*

Unsolved serial killer cases are those like the Zodiac Killer, the West Mesa Bone Collector, or Jack the Ripper, where the crimes have stumped officials for years. Notably, these killers may or may not be female; however, there must be relative confidence that the murders were

perpetrated by a woman for them to fit in this category. While this may be hard to establish, it may be reasonable to assume a female perpetrator in certain cases, especially in cases where the victims were children or the elderly; functionally, these cases may just be unsolved Angel of Death murders (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1999).

The above system is useful since it allows us to distinguish between cases of malicious intent as opposed to cases where external factors may be at play. For example, Andrea Yates--a woman who drowned her five children in a bathtub--is a case where her delusions were brought on by postpartum depression and psychosis made her fundamentally incapable of understanding her actions. In her case, the multiple deaths Andrea caused would qualify her as a serial killer based on strict typology. Ultimately, however, Andrea wasn't truly responsible for the murders because of the degree of her mental illness and delusions. For that reason, throwing Andrea in with individuals who maliciously and purposefully murder children would be a clear mischaracterization. The courts agreed that it would be a mischaracterization to view her as a criminal in the same way one might view other killers, and Andrea was found not guilty by reason of insanity (Andrea Yates, n.d.). For these kinds of distinctions, the Kelleher typology does a good job dividing up kinds of killers.

On the other hand, it is very hard to excuse the behavior of a black widow killer, regardless of what diagnoses she may otherwise have, because the method of killing implies a high degree of organization and premeditation. Thus, Kelleher noted that the "criminal" categories of serial killing are limited to black widows, angels of deaths, sexual predators, revenge killers, and profit/crime killers. Of course, not all of these types are common to serial

killing. Revenge killers in particular rarely engage in repeat murder, and female sexual predator killers are also very rare, as are profit/crime killers (Kelleher & Kelleher, 1999).

For the context of this analysis, the focus here will be on one of the most common types of female serial killers--black widows--by doing a deep dive into the case of Nannie Doss. In addition, individuals who do not fit any explicit Kelleher category will be examined through the case of Aileen Wuornos. For all of these cases, my ultimate goal is to understand the thoughts and impulses which motivated these killings. While many black widows desire financial profit, what specifically drives them towards murder in order to achieve monetary gain? And do women who do not fit neatly into existing categories--such as Wuornos--have any distinct motivations behind their behavior?

While Kelleher had originally hypothesized that Wuornos's behavior was sexually motivated, most studies and interviews indicated that she was not in fact a sexual predator. Her killing style, which fits a more traditionally masculine pattern, thus make for a good point of comparison with Doss. While Wuornos perhaps falls into Kelleher's "unexplained" category, the insertion of her distinctly psychopathic behavior into a category otherwise occupied by those with Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MSBP), miscellaneous mental disorders, and individuals completely unsure of their own motivations seems to be a misstep. As is, the "unexplained" category is vague and does little to elucidate the emotions and thoughts which drive homicidal behavior.



## Men vs. Women: Explaining the Gap

Differences between male and female aggression and criminality clearly exist. Whether it is the disparate rates in sexual violence, murder, or overall prison trends, men are more likely to commit most crimes. The causes of this vast divide however are not necessarily clear.

While biological differences between men and women clearly exist, just how dissimilar are male and female brains? Male brains are slightly larger, and perform better than females on spatial reasoning tasks, but possess no noticeable advantage on IQ testing. Moreover, male brains are more lateralized, meaning the two hemispheres operate more separately. On the other hand, females have a higher proportion of grey matter (the brain matter which contains the cell bodies of neurons) and the structural connectome in women is better connected (Szalkai, Varga, & Grolmusz, 2017). Women also perform better on tasks involving recollection or memory, such as matching and precision tests (Kimura, 2000). These differences, while statistically significant, do not particularly influence criminality in either sexes. Moreover, while the physical brain structures of men and women differ, they are only moderately sexually dimorphic.

So if brain anatomy and genetics are not independently sufficient to explain the difference between male and female criminality, what could be the explanation? Historical explanations for higher rates of male violence contend that, evolving out of a hunter-gatherer society, women became dependent on men due to their increased physical strength. Before modern technology, physical strength was critical in developing the first farms as humans settled down. With that, males became dominant over economic and resource security. With this power, males could act more aggressively towards women with little repercussion. Moving forward, economic dominance requires continual competition with those who may seek to overthrow you. This competition ultimately may breed violence outside of the relationship between the sexes

(Prinz, 2012). A study examining the evolutionary basis for differences in serial killers suggested a “hunter-gatherer” model. The model posits that male serial killers frequently act as “hunters,” stalking and killing targeted strangers in dispersed areas, while FSKs more frequently are “gatherers,” killing those who are around them and familiar to them and gaining profit from their crime (Harrison, 2015).

While this may explain why males are more likely to commit violence, this explanation fails on an individual level and arguably puts too much emphasis on economic motivations. Moreover, it is founded on the premise that our ancestors had a clear sex-based division of labor. This may or not be the case; despite common assumption that men were the primary hunters and women the primary gatherers, examining modern hunter-gatherer societies we see that this division isn’t always explicit and may not have been historically (Kozłowska, 2019). Men can be caregivers, women can be hunters, and historically the assumption to believe otherwise may not hold. Extending this criticism to Harrison’s explanation, we know that motivations vary widely and only a fraction of these murders are economically motivated. Moreover, both sexes are guilty of exhibiting economically motivated murder.

So is it possible that we are unintentionally socializing males to be naturally more aggressive? Rather than some evolutionary predisposition, is there conditioning going on behind the scenes that we just aren’t aware of? At a young age, society accepts and even encourages a degree of aggression in young boys. Whether it is action figures hoisting guns and violent video games or parents dismissing acts of aggression as “boys being boys”, young boys are allowed to exhibit a certain degree of violence. This aggression isn’t only assumed to be true, but it is taught through commercial products aimed at young boys. Colorado State University’s Women and Gender Advocacy Network looked to find the most common words used to market toys aimed at

boys and girls. While the most common toys for girls featured words like “love”, “magic”, and “fun”, the most common words for boy toys included words like “battle” and “power” (Men and Masculinity, n.d.). Moreover, parents and adults are more prone to roughhousing with young boys, while adults tend to tread more delicately with young women. All of these factors tend to encourage parents to focus on physical development in infant males in a way that is not mirrored in females (Dayton & Malone, 2016). Moreover, where parents prioritize physical development in males, they often give more consideration to emotional development in females. The difference in these two forms of socialization help explain why, females are overwhelmingly found to be more verbally aggressive than men, while males are more physically aggressive.

Socialization certainly influences rates of aggression in men and women and individuals with higher rates of aggression are more prone to criminal behavior. Therefore, it should not be surprising that men would display higher rates of criminality and more specifically, higher rates of serial murder.

## Chapter 2: Brains on Fire

### Hell Hath no Fury Like a Woman Afraid?

Normal people do not kill. At the same time, some argue that everyone has the potential to kill. However, this argument relies solely on motive to explain who will and who will not commit homicide. But this argument starts to fall apart in cases of serial murder. Unless an individual has a vendetta against a class of people, the idea that a person could be driven to kill not just one but multiple people solely out of revenge appears flimsy. It is common to dismiss motive altogether in favor of some ethereal evil driving the murders. However, a more nuanced approach to understanding serial killing requires that one go beyond the labels of evil and delve into the biology, genetics, and psychology behind the violence.

Aggression is not an exclusively masculine trait, nor is it necessarily maladaptive. Social aggression is used by men and women alike to coerce appropriate behavior, whether through law enforcement, verbal commands, or physical assault. While women are assumed to be less tactile in their aggression, women are hardly immune to engaging in acts of physical violence. According to the 2018 update of the 2015 CDC National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, 31% of men reported being victims of physical violence, with 14.9% of men experiencing severe physical violence, including having been “hit with a fist or something hard, kicked, hurt by pulling hair, slammed against something, tried to hurt by choking or suffocating, beaten, burned on purpose, used a knife or gun” (Smith, et al., 2018). While these cases are not exclusive to heterosexual relationships, the vast majority of this violence is being committed by women.

Of course, the prevalence of physical female aggression only tells us so much about female serial killing. So while it is worth looking at why some women may be predisposed to

physically aggressive behavior, the reasons do not wholly explain why some women become serial killers. According to the Aamodt database, 31.8% of serial killers identified enjoyment as a reason for killing, 30.14% killed for financial gain, and 18.07% killed out of anger (Aamodt, 2016). Although these statistics are not divided up between male and female killers, they provide a starting point for understanding how emotions like enjoyment and anger can trigger serial killing.

While most people control--either out of a sense of goodness or a fear of repercussion--their base instincts to commit violence, for others violence can feel thrilling or even cathartic. Basic fight or flight instincts often prompt violent behavior in response to stressors. In some cases, however, violence may become a crutch providing emotional pleasure. In one study through Virginia Commonwealth University, it was suggested that aggression and violence could be addictive, creating a rush of endorphins and triggering the same neural circuits as hard drugs, sex, and gambling (McNeill, 2017). Critically, like any other addiction, it stands to reason that some individuals may be more or less susceptible to dependency. Just like a drug addict may have a family history of substance abuse, some individuals may just be primed to acts of violence.

Fear may play an even stronger role than pleasure in facilitating violence. Feelings of fear are incredibly common among serial killers, and some psychologists believe that fear is the perfect catalyst for anger. According to criminologist Scott Bonn, violence as adults is largely a response to fear and unresolved childhood resentments (Bonn, 2017). In fact, according to Bonn, the most violent adults are those who have tremendous underlying fears of rejection, inadequacy, failure and abandonment.

Bonn's theories were based on the General Strain Theory (GST) of crime, which suggests that all crime evolves out of some personal strain occurring in the life of the perpetrator; GST suggests that this strain causes some mobilizing negative emotion, such as anger or sadness, which in turn drives crime. Research supporting GST suggests that "primal emotions" like pride, jealousy, lust, and resentment can all lead to violence. However, anger is particularly likely to result in acts of violence (Bonn, 2017). In an article for *Psychology Today*, Bonn suggested that anger is only a "secondary emotion or reaction" and that the behavior of most violent killers is ultimately "a childlike response to a frightening world that they believe has been unfair to them and is deserving of punishment" (2017).

Because of this root cause, childhood insecurities, abuse, and conditioning take on a crucial role in determining who does and do not escalate to murder. According to research out of the University of Minnesota, once the pathway for fear in the brain becomes engaged, the brain diverts energy away from rational processing paths and acts on signals from the amygdala to respond to a perceived threat. While our rational processing is off, our brain continues to process sensory information on the world around us. This information can later trigger feelings of fear, even if only as part of our unconscious mental processing (Bonn, 2017). As this fear becomes deeply ingrained, the brain relies more and more on these highly activated neural pathways. These fear based responses are often impulsive as the flight or fight response is triggered. In the case of serial killers, this response is most often fight.

In the case of black widows, the connection to fear is easy to see. Fear of potential abandonment or inadequacy may drive women to violence against their husbands or partners, although black widows ultimately act out of both fear as well as monetary gain. In addition, since many female serial killers have been abused in the past by a male family member, it stands to

reason that black widows fear relying on a male breadwinner, and thus strike out in order to gain control over their financial lives.

Power fantasies and fear of male dominance may also be the driving force for angels of death, who kill those abjectly weaker than them. Born out of fear of a world that disadvantages them, these women take advantage of those who are most vulnerable. Finally, sexually motivated female serial killers are presumed to be motivated by fear driven by prior abuse, though it is likely in these cases that additional neurological factors are at play. Functionally, fear may be the underlying emotion behind most categories of female murder.

## Mental Illness in Female Serial Killers

While serial killing does not require mental illness, many serial killers are in fact mentally ill. In general, however, mentally ill individuals are much more likely to be the victims of violent crime than the perpetrators. Nonetheless, serial killers overwhelmingly exhibit abnormal personality traits and a range of antisocial personality disorders, with one study finding that an astounding 86.5% of the serial killers met the Hare criteria for psychopathy, and another 9% presented partially with a few psychopathic traits (Stone, 2001).

In a 2015 study published in the *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 64 female serial killers were analyzed using mass media reports to assess their patterns of behavior. Thirty nine percent of these killers had severe mental illness (Harrison, et al., 2015). An important aspect of this study is that it fails to specifically outline the criteria for the determination of the term severe. Severe is a rather normative categorization that lends itself towards a variety of explanations. It may refer to cases that have a specific diagnosis, but it may also mean cases that are difficult to classify, treat, or even accurately observe. Among the most common disorders found in the study were schizophrenia, antisocial personality disorder, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, and MSBP. However, the only two cases of MSBP in the study were both found to also be schizophrenic (Harrison et al.).

Unlike the other disorders on the list, schizophrenia is characterized by extreme abnormal thinking and a loss of touch with reality<sup>1</sup>. Also, due to its comorbidity with schizophrenia, I will not consider MSBP either, and instead focus in the remainder of this paper on three of the most common diagnoses among serial killers overall: antisocial personality disorder (including psychopathy and sociopathy), narcissistic personality disorder, and borderline personality disorder. None of these disorders present drastically differently in men than they do in women. While the prevalence of these various disorders varies between the sexes, the symptoms of these disorders do not change with gender.

Antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) is a personality disorder where individuals display little regard for others, show a low degree of empathy, and exhibit a disregard for right and wrong (American Psychiatric Association, 2016). These individuals tend to be highly

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the rareness of schizophrenic killers and the nature of schizophrenia, I do not consider these cases here especially since they are not particularly informative about the nature of homicidal motivations.



manipulative and callous, and are largely unremorseful when confronted over their behavior. These individuals are more likely to be criminals and lawbreakers, liars, and often abuse drugs and/or alcohol; according to the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) individuals with ASPD are seven to eight times more likely to meet criteria for alcohol dependence, and 15 to 17 times more likely to meet criteria for drug dependence (Werner, Few & Bucholz, 2015). While antisocial personality disorder has a number of risk factors, including genetics and a family history of antisocial behavior, environmental factors like childhood abuse, instability, and neglect can all contribute to individuals developing antisocial traits.

In the DSM-5, psychopathy and sociopathy are both described as forms of ASPD (American Psychiatric Association, 2016). The distinction between the two is not always well defined, and both disorders are characterized by a lack of empathy and a failure to display guilt. Nonetheless, sociopaths are more prone towards volatility, impulsiveness, and fits of rage. Sociopaths are also capable of forming personal attachments and exhibit some degree of empathy, though these attachments may be fraught with difficulty. Meanwhile, psychopaths are unable to form any degree of attachment, and tend to be naturally predatory and aggressive (Bonn, 2018). The end result is that psychopaths are even more dangerous and more conniving than sociopaths. Diagnosing psychopathy is further complicated under the DSM-5 because psychopaths need not meet all the criteria, but instead just need to *strongly* meet a handful of criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2016). What this means is that someone may have a high degree of public control over their emotions and the ability to hold some personal attachments, while still remaining devoid of empathy and prone to impulsive acts of violence.

Fundamentally, psychopaths are better at mimicry of social norms and are also very charming (e.g. Ted Bundy or John Wayne Gacy).

ASPD presents far more often in males than females (at a rate of about 3:1) (Alegria, et al., 2013). Moreover, women with ASPD report more environmental triggers (i.e. sexual abuse, childhood neglect, and familial-related adversity) than their male counterparts as well as higher rates of comorbidity with mood disorders (Alegria). Women with ASPD are less prone towards violence but are actually more inclined towards aggressive and irritable behavior and also exhibit higher rates of impulsivity and remorselessness (Alegria). This cocktail of behaviors is a recipe for criminal activity; environmental triggers are often critical in priming women to indulge in extreme acts of violence. While women with ASPD rarely care about the consequences when they hurt others, they do not necessarily wish to commit violence and may not have the same urges to commit violent acts that other groups exhibit (Alegria). But while female with ASPD may have a greater degree of care for others, it is unclear whether this is a result of female neurological mechanisms to maintain social harmony and foster security, or, whether it is because of gender constructs and social grooming to encourage girls to be emotionally sensitive.

Regardless of these distinctions, the pillars of ASPD, impulsivity and a lack of empathy, are two key ingredients in the making of a serial killer: (Rosewood & Lo, 2017). The two feed into one another. One may impulsively act and accidentally hurt another. In the absence of empathy, the brain may not reflexively regret the action. The endorphins released by the action create a high, and as long as no external punishment result from the original impulse, the brain may reinforce the behavior. Rather than consider the hurt one has caused and move to rectify the mistake, the brain may strengthen the neural pathways that encouraged the action. Impulsivity may lead to any sort of behavior likely to get one in trouble with the law, and

criminality is far more commonly observed in psychopaths and sociopaths than in neurotypicals (individuals who do not present with a form of mental illness). Higher degrees of impulsivity may also mean greater risks are taken, yielding either greater regrets (and perhaps long prison sentences in some cases) or greater rewards. Meanwhile, as a person becomes less empathic, the impulsive mind can act more quickly on a greater number of nefarious opportunities.

However, if female serial killers are impulsive, why are women more likely to use poison than men? Poison requires a degree of planning, thus its use appears less impulsive. The most obvious reason is that because women are not as physically strong as men, they may feel the need to “distance themselves from the action” and use less physical means to kill their targets. At the same time, one would expect that impulsiveness would drive away the careful planning which is seen with many female serial killers and which is necessitated by the use of poison.

While psychopathy and sociopathy are perhaps the most intuitive diagnosis for serial killers, a number of other disorders are often present in individuals with homicidal tendencies. Specifically, narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is often observed in serial killers. Narcissists lack both self-awareness and empathy, and also typically exhibit no concern for the well-being of others. Narcissistic traits may be even more likely to evolve in children of troubled backgrounds, who find that they can only count on themselves, as they experienced disillusionment with their parental figures, in particular, the mother (Vaknin, 2008). While not all serial killers are narcissists, most serial killers share at least a handful of narcissistic traits. Moreover, narcissists may be particularly likely to exhibit sadist behavior against their victims. According to a Russian professor of psychology Sam Vaknin, “the inability to empathize, the exploitativeness, the sense of entitlement, the rages, the dehumanization and devaluation of others - this mindset yields abysmal contempt for the narcissist's victims” (Vaknin). Vaknin specifically makes this claim in

the context of narcissistic serial killers, a claim supported by traditional serial killers like Ted Bundy, and by less traditional serial killers and mass murderers like Adolf Hitler. Of course, narcissism is not a requirement for serial killing. Many killers, such as Jeffrey Dahmer, for example, exhibited strong streaks of self-loathing (Jeffrey Dahmer's *Inferno*, 1991). Nonetheless, delusions of grandeur and a low regard for others are certainly a red flag for future violent behavior.

Stepping on an ant, for example, is of little consequence to most people and killing an ant is unlikely to cause a moral panic for anybody. Killing the ant may even feel good or cause a rush; the ant is, after all, either an inconvenience or a pest, and if it is in your ability to quash it, then why not? While most people give little thought to stepping on an ant, when the victim is not an ant but a person, the perceived scope of the violence becomes exponentially greater and most people wouldn't dare. Narcissism, however, removes, or at least weakens, this barrier to violence.

One study comparing female inmates to non-delinquent women found that narcissism was a stronger predictor of aggressiveness than even criminality (Kalemi, et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the report did not find significant differences in aggression between inmates convicted of violent crimes against victims convicted of non-violent crimes. The researchers suggest that violent criminality in females differs from violent male criminality in that female violence is largely reactive, with most females acting in response to some perceived threat, such as domestic abuse (Kalemi, et al.). Thus, females who acted aggressively in the moment and broke the law may not be actually be more aggressive than inmates who were not convicted of violent crimes. As a result, a single instance of aggression may not portend the presence of NPD in women. However, it is reasonable to assume that the presence of NPD increases aggressive

behavior. A study out of the University of Liverpool found that narcissistic females were equally as likely as narcissistic men to be highly sexually aggressive and coercive. While female serial killers are far less likely than male serial killers to be sexually motivated, female serial killers with NPD may be more likely to sexually abuse their victims. This may mean raping their victims before killing them, or, attempting to sexually coerce their victims before getting frustrated and killing them in an act of pent up anger.

Lastly, borderline personality disorder (BPD) may be increasingly common in serial killers. Individuals with BPD have extremely unstable self-images as well as an impaired ability to empathize. Thus while individuals with BPD might be very self-critical, they fail to recognize emotional signals in others. Moreover, individuals with BPD may exhibit frequent changes in mood or affect, depression, anxiety, and a high degree of impulsivity and inclination for risk taking behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2016). While BPD is not statistically linked with violence, impulsiveness is one of the most common traits exhibited in serial killers (Rosewood & Lo). As a result, some serial killers prone to rage-induced outbursts might be viewed as having borderline tendencies. While no study has proven a link between serial killing and BPD, in one study of 90 British men who had committed homicide, 50% displayed characteristics of BPD (Sansone & Sansone, 2009). While the psychological traits of individuals who kill one person are not necessarily identical to those who kill many, it stands to reason that traits linked to impulsive one-off kills could be applied to individuals who impulsively kill a number of times, such as Jeffrey Dahmer or Aileen Wuornos.

In a 2009 study on prison populations, 29.5% of newly admitted prisoners at the Iowa Department of Correction met the criteria for BPD; but the rate of BPD among imprisoned women was twice that of the imprisoned men. A number of other studies have also found that

while the rate of BPD in male prisoners approximates that of the general population, BPD rates amongst female prisoners seem to skyrocket. Moreover, a study published in the *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* found that women who had been incarcerated for crimes of major violence were four times as likely to be diagnosed with BPD than those who had been imprisoned for lesser acts of violence. Moreover, a strong, positive association was found between BPD and violent crimes (Blackburn, 2009). Whether or not BPD is the most common diagnosis among female serial killers is unclear. However, female serial killers such as Aileen Wuornos (unspecified typology) and Kristen H. Gilbert (angel of death) were both diagnosed by the state's expert psychiatrists as having BPD.

Of course, these disorders do not exist in a vacuum and diagnoses often overlap, which can make drawing conclusions regarding the effects of any particular disorder difficult. While ASPD, NPD, and BPD are among the most common diagnoses for serial killers, these disorders are by no means exclusive; other disorders, like schizoid personality disorder, depression and anxiety are also common diagnoses for serial murderers.

Comorbidity is common for many mental illnesses, and is presumably even more common in the case of serial killers. Evidence specific to comorbidity in individuals with NPD however is scarce since narcissists rarely view themselves as being the problem and therefore do not seek out psychological treatment. At the same time, one study found that over half of individuals diagnosed with ASPD had a comorbid anxiety disorder (Goodwin & Hamilton, 2003). Working from the viewpoint that most serial killers ultimately act out from a place of fear and insecurity, it is not surprising that sociopaths and psychopaths exhibit anxiety. In addition, individuals with ASPD and a comorbid anxiety disorder were more likely to have major depression, substance use disorders, and suicidal ideation attempts than persons with only ASPD

or an anxiety disorder. Moreover, these individuals displayed significantly higher rates of substance and alcohol abuse, which were strikingly common in homicidal individuals.

Additionally, among patients diagnosed with BPD, one study found a rate of 96% comorbidity between BPD and mood disorders over the duration of the person's life, as well as a comorbidity rate between 50-56% for substance and/or alcohol abuse (Goodwin & Hamilton). While substance abuse is an epidemic with criminals, substance abuse also lowers the inhibitions of the user. In the case of those with BPD who already struggle with judgment and mood instability, abuse of drugs and alcohol may function as a final blow to any inhibitions towards violence.

Regardless of the mental illnesses of these individuals, most serial killers are not deemed legally insane (Bonn, 2014). Because serial killers are usually non-psychotic and can distinguish right and wrong even while engaging in violent conduct, most serial killers don't qualify under the law as criminally insane. Importantly, insanity is not a psychological term, but a legal term used to determine if someone can be held accountable in a criminal court for their behavior.

## Ain't that a Kick in the Head

The brain is infinitely complex, with over 100 billion neurons intimately connected. In total, over 100 trillion synapses exist in the brain, firing a complex array of neurotransmitter (Cherry, 2019). A single synapse does not direct any one action or behavior; instead a tidal wave of synapses pushes the brain to direct appropriate responses to environmental stimuli. But what happens when the brain experiences significant trauma? While the plasticity of the brain is impressive and can do much to combat injury, there is only so much our grey matter can take before the mind is irreversibly changed.

Perhaps the best example of such a change is the curious case of Phineas Gage, a 19th century construction foreman who in 1848 survived after an iron rod was forced through his skull, resulting in the almost complete destruction of his left frontal lobe. Despite his astonishing survival, Gage's case was not one of joyful recovery, but of personality metamorphosis. Gage, who had previously been known as hard working and level headed, became foul-mouthed and deeply unstable, and lost his position as a foreman, with his friends reporting that he was "No longer Gage" (The Phineas Gage Story, n.d). Studies of Gage's brain found particular damage in the connections between the frontal cortex and the limbic system, the brain's center for emotional regulation. Gage's tragic accident ultimately resulted in the development of some form of sociopath or antisocial personality disorder. Gage's case, while extreme, was a clear illustration that lesions to the brain could cause mental disorders in otherwise healthy individuals.

Gage is perhaps the most well known and extreme case of a brain injury causing a substantial shift in personality. But Gage is hardly the only instance where mental illness was a precursor to the development of more unsavory personality traits. Serial killers like Edmund



Kemper, John Wayne Gacy, Jerry Brudos, Gary Heidnik and Ed Gein were all known to have experienced some form of brain injury prior to their nefarious killing sprees (Perry, 2017).

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) can cause dramatically different neurological changes depending on the severity and location of the impact; from mental retardation to changes in personality and mood, the individual results can be unpredictable. However, cases where individuals develop high degrees of aggression and/or impulsive outbursts are not unheard of. Episodes ranging from mild irritability to violent assaults on others may be observed, as the brain is unable to process information how it had before the injury. With damage to a given area, the brain may be entirely unable to assess degrees of emotional intensity and thus may respond to minor insults with extreme rage (Challenging & Complex Behavior, n.d.).

In a 2014 study of 239 contemporary serial killers, TBI was observed in 21% of killers (McCoy, 2014). More broadly, a 2011 meta-analysis study conducted by Brigham Young University found that incarcerated individuals were significantly more likely than the general population to have experienced TBI (Farrer, Frost & Hedges, 2012). Based on these studies, it is believed that TBI may be linked with an increased likelihood of criminal violence.

Of course, not all TBIs impact the same part of the brain. In a study at Vanderbilt University using lesion network mapping, 17 criminals with brain lesions were compared against 23 volunteers from the general population with brain lesions. The criminals had engaged in various crimes including assault, rape and murder. Fifteen of the 17 criminals had no history of criminal behavior before suffering from TBI. The exact location of the lesions varied, spanning both lobes and a number of cortexes; nonetheless, all 17 criminals were found to have lesions in the same connectome or neural network. While the brain is made of distinct regions with explicit functions, the network of the brain is ultimately far more interconnected than a high school

biology diagram would have you think. Connectomes ultimately illustrate the inter-regional series of neurons and synapses that direct behavior along a common functional network. Among the criminals examined in the study, all lesions were found to be linked to the broad network of moral decision-making. This connectome deals with morality, criminality, and value-based decision making as well as the “theory of mind”, which refers to the ability to understand someone else’s point of view. Notably, the lesions did not specifically damage sectors of the brain related to empathy. However, with increased impulsivity and an impaired ability to judge moral decision making, violence appeared to occur regardless. When compared to the lesions found in the general population, the TBIs in the criminal cohort were found in regions unrelated to the moral decision-making network (Darby, Horn & Cushman, 2018).

At the same time, it is hard to say that a brain injury *made* these individuals commit crimes. We typically view people as having agency and a degree of free will. Ultimately, while a large number of serial killers are found to have brain lesions due to TBI, for the most part it is not known where in the brain damage was done. We can say that a person killed because of brain damage, but, without brain scans, assuming a causal connection is tenuous, especially because many serial killers report having experienced brain damage in childhood (Perry). As a result, there is often no before-and-after with these individuals. Since these individuals are claiming TBI for as long as they’ve been capable of criminality, causality is very difficult if not altogether impossible to pinpoint.

Instead of considering TBI to be an excuse for abhorrent behavior, TBI is perhaps best understood as a significant risk factor and potential precursor to criminal action. A number of environmental conditions are commonly observed in the childhoods of serial killer. Broadly speaking, these conditions may prime the brain to a point where committing violence is second

nature, regardless of TBI. In cases where an individual has reported a history of childhood physical abuse, TBI is not an uncommon consequence (Sandel, 2017). Thus untangling the psychological impact of childhood abuse and the neurological impact of brain trauma may be impossible in a number of cases.

One might imagine that the issue of TBI and violence is not gender specific. However, there are notable differences in how brain injuries seem to affect men and women. A retrospective study examining how TBI differs between the genders found that, female patients with TBI (who only represented 20% of the TBI cases) were far more likely to report symptoms (Munivenkatappa, 2016). While conjecture, the much higher rate of TBI in men than in women could account for some of the differences in the rates that men and women engage in criminal behavior. At the same time, ultimately, the fact that TBI has a stronger symptomatic effect on women could mean that women with TBI could be particularly vulnerable to environmental stressors, making criminality even more likely.

How TBI affects the brain is of course not the only difference between men and women biologically; nevertheless, the neural networks of men and women generally track each other (Bergland, 2015). However, differences do exist, and are most notable in the regions of the brain related to sexuality. While both male and female serial killers are statistically more likely to have TBI, male serial killers are far more likely to be sexually motivated than their female counterparts (Kozlowska, 2019). Presumably these differences are caused by fundamental differences in female and male expressions of violence and aggression and are not a result of TBI. Through damage to the moral decision-making connectome, both women and men with TBI may be more prone to violent and impulsive aggression; however, the linkages in the brain between sex and violence may be more naturally imbedded.

Two types of sexual selection exist: intrasexual selection (competition between individuals of a given sex), and intersexual selection (mate choice from the opposite sex). Like two elk battling for access over a female, or a young lion fighting the existing male to the death for dominance over a pride, it is common for males of many species to engage in violence against one another (intrasexual selection) for access to mates (Brennan, 2010). In humans, however, intersexual selection is the norm, where an individual chooses one potential mate over another based on a variety of characteristics. However, evidence indicated that even in humans intrasexual selection plays a stronger role than female choice in that physical dominance predicts mating success in men (Kordsmeyer et al., 2018). With numerous species in the animal kingdom, the solution for males who are at the bottom in this matchup is to force the female into copulating. Some species have such a high degree of sexual violence that a kind of evolutionary sexual arms race develops. Female ducks, for example, have over time developed a corkscrew-shaped vagina to encourage consensual copulation. Rather than accepting this, male ducks evolved corresponding corkscrew penises. This race continues with females developing new biological tactics for evasion and males developing responding tactics for incursion (Brennan, 2010).

Thankfully, humans are not ducks. Still, sexual violence is statistically far more common among males. Fundamentally, human males have evolved to either take advantage of consensual mate choice, or violent apprehension of females. And while, broadly speaking, the impulses towards the latter are under control in most populations, sexual violence against women still occurs. So when lesions occur in the moral decision-making part of the male brain, these impulses may be far quicker to come to the surface. Female brains, on the other hand, don't have that kind of evolutionary wiring. While aberrant cases of female sexual violence exist, the idea of

female choice appears to be evolutionarily ingrained, and thus the female sexual strategy is merely to invite potential mates in, not to abduct and sexually conquer potential mates.

Ultimately, while TBI in females may cause severe lapses in judgment, it is unlikely to spawn sexually violent behavior.

## Childhood Violence, Sexual Trauma, and Neural Plasticity Gone Wrong

When America's first serial killer, H.H. Holmes, was finally apprehended, he made the following statement:

I was born with the devil in me. I could not help the fact that I was a murderer, no more than the poet can help the inspiration to sing — I was born with the 'Evil One' standing as my sponsor beside the bed where I was ushered into the world, and he has been with me since (H.H. Holmes, 2014).

Fundamentally, Holmes was playing on an assumption that many people make, that serial killers are born evil. The reality, however, is much more nuanced. Our behaviors are not merely dictated by a genetic script. To the contrary, genetics serve as a template for how one may react or respond in different situations. However, some genetic strains are never expressed at all, requiring environmental stimuli to flip an internal switch (Choi & Kim, 2007).

A notable example of this phenomenon is the gene MAOA, also called the "human warrior gene". Certain variations in this gene have been linked with the development of antisocial behavior. However, the relationship between having the variation and behavioral abnormalities is not as straightforward as one might expect. Rather, the influence of the allele on the presence of antisocial mannerisms is mediated by childhood treatment, with mistreated children with the gene being at a much higher risk for abnormalities (Powledge, 2016).

MAOA is but one example illustrating how environmental conditions can exacerbate existing predispositions to violence. There are in fact a number of environmental characteristics

that are statistically common among serial killers and, more broadly, among violent offenders. Specifically, exposure to violence or physical abuse, an unstable home life and/or parental relationship, and sexual abuse are all common experiences of serial killers. While not all of these factors are triggers for certain genetic levers, repeated abuse and childhood events ultimately all have the capacity to permanently change both the brain structures and the psychology of individuals (Scully, 2019).

At a UK conference, researcher Abbie Marono presented findings looking at childhood abuse in conjunction with certain serial killing typologies: specifically, lust and rape, anger, power, and financial gain killers. Marono examined these varying typologies, looking for differences in experiences with childhood abuse and differentiating between psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. The study ultimately found that a history of sexual abuse was often linked to rape/lust and anger typologies. Sexual abuse was also found to be linked to overkill cases, postmortem sex, and moving bodies from the site of the murder. Meanwhile, physical childhood abuse was associated with the rape/lust typology, and also was linked to behaviors such as carrying out the act quickly, binding a body, and leaving a body at the crime scene (Marono & Keatley, 2018).

The link between a history of sexual abuse and serial killers was further supported in a 2005 study of 50 serial killers through Radford University. Across all of the subjects, rates of childhood abuse were far higher than rates in the general population, with 36% percent reporting physical abuse, 26% reporting sexual abuse, and 50% reporting psychological abuse. In addition, 18% of serial killers reported a history of childhood neglect (Mitchell & Aamodt, 2005). Unfortunately, the Radford study did not include a single female serial killer. This of course is another example of the difficulties with studying female serial killers. Moreover, the fact that the

study showed such a strong linkage between childhood sexual abuse and lust killing doesn't at face value seem to be the case for female serial killers, since only a very small fraction of female serial killers seem to be sexually motivated.

While females don't react the same way to sexual abuse as males, there is no doubt that there is a psychological impact. In a study on the influence of narcissism in criminals, a researcher examined childhood abuse in female inmates. The study noted that across the board, criminal behavior in women is linked to a history of female victimization. Aggressive women have often either witnessed or been the victim of domestic violence and this kind of abuse is often linked to their criminal activity. Astoundingly, about half of female prisoners have been the victim of physical or sexual abuse (Kalemi, et al., 2019).

Using data from the Radford database, The Chicago School of Professional Psychology released its findings on the average profile of female serial killers. Overall, their findings showed that a smaller percent of female serial killers reported a history of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse than their male counterparts. However, the Radford database has information on over 3,000 male serial killers but only includes 361 females. Moreover, the database is woefully incomplete, with individual histories (including abuse and mental illness) often being unavailable due to the lack of published information. Additionally, the database often did not record the presence or absence of the three types of abuse, and this lack of information was even more common in the female profiles (Reed, 2019). The statistical gaps in the study therefore make it hard to make conclusive assessments on the differences between male and female serial killers. Still, while the effects of abuse may be obscured by missing data, they are clearly not good.

Understanding the psychology of instability in the home is perhaps more abstract in terms of linking it to criminality. However, it is likely that an unstable home would drive individuals to

become more impulsive. Impulsivity can develop in a similar way. As a young person goes through life and finds their efforts (whether academic or social) continually thwarted by things outside of their control, it becomes easy to stop trying all together. Moreover, if someone's efforts are constantly dismissed or rejected, a feeling of anger can develop. Imagine a child in a room for hours on end, being told over and over again that he is wrong. Eventually, the child may throw a tantrum or act out. Ultimately though, studies regarding this kind of instability and serial killing are not available. Broadly speaking, neglect is linked with increased rates of aggression and delinquency, however, females appear to be less susceptible to this influence (Lansford et al., 2007).



## Chapter 3: Case Studies

The following case studies have been chosen specifically in juxtaposition. Specifically, the Doss case has been chosen as an example of a “traditional” female serial killer (i.e. one who kills using poison, kills intimate family members, is economically motivated). In other words, Doss fits into existing typologies for female killers. Between 1920 and 1954, serial killer Nancy Doss killed 11 people in Oklahoma, including four husbands, two children, two sisters, her mother, a grandson, and one of her mother in-laws. For that reason, she became known as the Giggling Granny, the Lonely Hearts Killers, the Black Widow, and Lady Bluebeard. The case of Aileen Wuornos, on the other hand, has been chosen because Wuornos' actions cannot be adequately explained by the current typologies. While Wuornos' nicknames were not as catchy as Doss's, Wuornos ultimately drew national attention for shooting and killing six men with a shotgun at point blank range.

### Nannie Doss: You Don't Want a Slice of that Pie

In 1905, Nannie Doss (born Nancy Hazle) was born in Alabama to parents James and Lou Hazle. Nannie's childhood was not picturesque. Rather, it was spent in terror at the hands of her abusive, authoritarian father. James Hazle was stern and adamant that his daughters were not

allowed to enhance their physical appearances; dresses, makeup, and friendship with men were out of the question, supposedly to prevent the Hazle girls from being molested by men (Harvey, 2015).

In interviews, Nannie stated that at the age of seven, she was riding a train when it stopped abruptly; Nannie fell forward and hit her head on a sharp metal bar. In the following years she experienced migraine headaches, blackouts and depression and blamed her mental instability on the trauma. In addition to the trauma, James regularly pulled Nannie from school to work on the family farm, and eventually Nannie left school all together after the 6th grade. A few years later, in 1921, Nannie got her first job at a linen factory where for the first time she was able to have social interaction with men. In her free time she had one notable hobby: reading romance magazines and lonely hearts club sections (Harvey).

During her time at the factory, Nannie met Charley Braggs, an unmarried man who took care of his also unmarried mother. After five months of dating, the two were married and moved into her mother-in-law's home. Nannie however quickly found her mother-in-law to be controlling and manipulative. Over the next three years, Nannie had four children. Between her controlling mother-in-law, her young children, and an increasingly alcoholic and abusive Charley, Nannie felt trapped and began drinking and frequenting local bars, seeking out men (Harvey).

In 1927, Nannie's two middle children died of apparent food poisoning, both having seemed healthy before Charley left for work one day (Newton, 1990). Charley, suspecting Nannie for the deaths, fled with their eldest child Melvina, leaving their newborn Florine and his mother behind. Unsurprisingly, Charley's mother died soon after. Eventually, Charley returned to reclaim their home, at which point Nannie left, this time with both children in tow (Harvey).

At this point, Nannie returned to her passion for romance magazines, this time reaching out to desperate souls looking for love. Through this correspondence, she met her second husband, Robert “Frank” Harrelson, who married Nannie and the family moved to Jacksonville when Nannie was 24. Rather than the Don Juan she had imagined, Frank proved to be a drunkard in a large amount of debt who regularly enjoyed bar fights. Still, Frank would not meet his demise for 16 years (Harvey).

In 1943, daughter Melvina had her first child, Robert, followed by a second child two years later. Soon after the birth of Melvina's second child, a young and healthy girl, the child was found dead. Due to a difficult delivery, Melvina recalled that she was in and out of consciousness, but in the haze remembered her mother sticking a hatpin into the head of the infant, although Melvina's claim was never corroborated. Later, Nannie would take care of baby Robert. However, after a fight between Nannie and Melvina, Robert was found dead of asphyxiation. Within a few months, Nannie collected a \$500 insurance policy on the young child. That same year, in September of 1945, Frank became ill and died. In her subsequent confession, Nannie would later claim that Frank had come home drunk and raped her. In an act of revenge, Nannie laced his corn whiskey with rat poison and watched him die a painful death (Montaldo, 2019).

After the death of husband number two, Nannie again found solace in the classified ads. She met Arlie Lanning, and within two days of their first meeting, the two were married. While Lanning was also an alcoholic, unlike Frank he was not violent. By this point however Nannie would disappear for weeks if not months at a time. Two years into the marriage, Lanning died, supposedly of a heart attack brought on by the flu. While Lanning had left his house to his sister, the house mysteriously burned to the ground before the sister could take ownership. Nannie

eventually moved in with Lanning's mother, but after receiving the insurance check for the damaged house Nannie disappeared. Before leaving, Lanning's mother died in her sleep. From there, Nannie moved in with her sister Dovie, who was dying of cancer and who ultimately succumbed while under Nannies's care (Harvey).

Nannie again returned to the market for love, joining the Diamond Circle Club, where she met her fourth husband, Richard Morton. While Morton was not an alcoholic, he was less than faithful. Enraged and also looking to marry a different man, she wanted to kill Morton. However, she was stymied when her mother moved in with the couple after her father died. Within days of arriving, her mother was dead, complaining of severe stomach cramps. Three months later, Morton would die of similar complaints (Harvey).

Nannie married her final husband, Samuel Doss, and moved to Oklahoma. Samuel was a Nazarene minister and widower who had lost his wife and nine of his children in a tornado. Unlike her previous husbands, Samuel was a good man who loved Nannie dearly. However, he was both frugal and boring, hardly like the men in Nannie's romance novels. Samuel kept a strict Christian household, with no romance novels or television shows after 9:30 p.m. Samuel was also restricting Nannie's access to cash. Nannie resented this, but eventually convinced Samuel to give her access to his bank accounts (Harvey).

Feigning the role of doting wife, Nannie convinced Samuel to take out two life insurance policies with Nannie as the only benefactor. In one of the least surprising turn of events in history, Samuel soon went to the hospital, reporting stomach troubles. After partially recovering, he returned home, only to die his first night out of the hospital after eating a warm, home cooked meal from Nannie. Due to his sudden demise, an autopsy on Samuel's body was performed, which found that Samuel had consumed enough arsenic to kill 20 men (Newton). After being

interrogated, Nannie ultimately confessed to killing her four husbands, her mother, her sister Dovie, her grandson Robert, and Arlie Lanning's mother (Harvey).

In the aftermath, Nannie was jovial, enjoying her 15 minutes of fame, and joking about her dead husbands and how she killed them, even joking about a sweet potato pie which she had laced with arsenic. On May 17, 1955, Nannie was given a life sentence. However, Nannie only served eight years of her sentence, when she died of leukemia in 1963 (Montaldo, 2019).

### The Psychological Underpinnings of the Doss Murders

The case of Nannie Doss has a number of the hallmarks associated with female serial killers: killing close to home, killing the infirm or powerless and using poison to kill instead of more typical methods, such as using a gun or a knife. In those ways, Nannie's profile is consistent with the average or stereotypical female killer.

Looking deeper, Nannie's background is also consistent psychologically: an authoritarian, borderline abusive father, a history of alcohol abuse, and a reported adolescent brain injury. Given her background, Nannie would have been far more likely to later engage in violent and criminal behaviors. In fact, Nannie specifically blamed her head injury as the cause of her mental instability. While her injury could perhaps explain some instability and also the dementia she developed later in life, there is no other evidence that this injury happened, nor did Nannie undergo brain scans that could have shed some light on the psychological causes of her behavior. In any event, Nannie's purported brain damage was not enough to get Nannie found not guilty by reason of insanity: before trial she was found sane by four different psychiatrists.

While the reported childhood train accident may in fact have played a part in Nannie's violent streak, it was certainly not the only explanation. A cousin looking into the family suggested that Nannie came by her temper honestly. She commented specifically, "Nannie just

had a plain old mean streak...I have learned that many of our members carried a fierce pride and a tough, tough, tough reputation. While they didn't take lives, they were nonetheless hard people. I believe Nannie bore that trait, but simply took her bad humor dangerously further” (Geringer, 2013).

At first glance, Nannie is the archetypal case of a black widow. She actively pursued men who would give her access to money, and then, would poison them leaving her the recipient to whatever wealth was left. In interviews, however, Nannie claimed that her motivation wasn't monetary, rather, Nannie asserted that she was just searching “for the perfect mate, the real romance in life” (DeLong, 2018). While this perhaps could explain the killing of four of her five husbands, it certainly would not explain the rest of Nannie's murders. So how should we characterize Nannie?

It is important to consider Nannie's infatuation with romance novels and lonely hearts club advertisements. Nannie may not have been delusional to the point of legal insanity, but she had certainly been sucked into a kind of alternate reality. Kept separate from men at a young age except for a few less than savory encounters, Nannie's exposure to men was flawed from a young age. With the introduction of romance novels, Nannie began to rewrite her expectations to fulfill a kind of fantasy. Seeking an escape from the world, she fell quickly into relationships only to terminate these relationships when they did not meet the standards of the men that she would read about in the Harlequin romance novels. Angered by her unfulfilled expectations, she lashed out at her husband, freeing herself up to go searching again for Prince Charming.

The reasons for her lashing out at other family members are more open to interpretation. One could conclude that due to the nature of her other victims (either very young, old, or sick), Doss was acting upon some sort of power fantasy. If one is to take her own words at face value

that she was seeking out a man, this explanation fails. Looking back at the romance novels, it may make more sense that Doss was not only seeking out a mate, but seeking out a fantasy. The lives of heroines in tawdry novels rarely involve kids or nagging mother in laws. In removing these other individuals from her life, Doss moved closer to this fantasy. While Nannie did take out insurance policies on many of the individuals who she killed, I am unconvinced that money was Nannie's motivating factor. Rather, Nannie most likely chose to take out policies to increase her ability to attract a future mate and establish the kind of fantasy lifestyle she so craved. Regardless, to kill over and over Nannie must have derived some sort of pleasure from the act itself. In the *A-Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, authors Harold Schechter and David Everitt ultimately concluded that “[Nannie] killed because she liked it” (Schechter & Everitt, 2006).

Looking at her motivating emotions, Doss was certainly motivated by anger: anger at her adulterous, alcoholic husbands, anger at the disappointments of her life in comparison to her novels, and perhaps anger at her lack of independent economic mobility. Whether anger was truly the core catalyst for her behavior or whether there was something else at play is unknown. Perhaps Nannie was afraid of facing a long and lonely life accompanied only by men like her father. With this fear as her guide, she may have cut down her immediate family to give herself the freedom to find someone else. Ultimately, Nannie found something pleasurable in killing, whether it was pleasure in giving into her anger or acting out a kind of revenge against men who failed to meet her lofty expectations. Regardless of the primary or “core” emotion behind Nannie's murders, the behaviors leading to the deaths of Nannie's 11 victims all suggest Nannie having a complete lack of empathy and a high degree of negative reactivity (which is a person's response to a negative outcome). As soon as someone acted outside of Nannie's ideal, they were put on Nannie's list of people destined to die.

## Categorizing Doss and Redefining the Black Widow Typology

Looking at the various typological distinctions, Nannie was largely organized in her killing: she took measures to hide her kills, made efforts to gain financially after the murders, and did not kill strangers. Nonetheless, she was certainly impulsive, and failed to adequately hide her final murders. This may be explained somewhat by Nannie's early onset dementia. However, in Nannie's case, this binary typology may not be entirely adequate.

Looking at Holmes and DeBurger's motivational model instead, Nannie could perhaps be described as a mission-oriented killer. These killers are usually seeking revenge on a specific person or a group of people in order to "rid the world" of some stain on society, in Nannie's case being unfit men/bad husbands. As far as "missions" go, Nannie was clearly only interested in herself. However, her murders provide insight into Nannie's view on men in general. While never clearly expressed, it would not be surprising for Nannie to have seen men as either shining knights or the scum of the earth, and in killing her no-good husbands she may have felt some internal sense of justice. While not exact, this typological model does at least help pin down Nannie's behaviors and could be useful when applied to some female killers.

Moving onto the Kelleher model for female serial killers, Nannie fits clearly into the black widow model. She killed her husband and other family members with poison, and did realize some financial gain. The Kelleher model does not appear to do a great job in Nannie's case of establishing a pattern of motivation. Therefore, what may be necessary is a hybrid typology of the motivational model and the Kelleher model.

Since black widow killers are organized and carefully plan their killers, we can exclude a hybrid black widow/visionary or psychotic classification. The Holmes and DeBurger motivational classifications then include a hedonistic group, which is further divided into lust oriented, thrill oriented, and comfort killers. To my knowledge, no cases of women seeking



husbands and murdering them exist where a sexual or thrill based motivation is present. In particular, it is unlikely that a thrill based motivation would underlie black widow murders, again because of their organized nature. On the other hand, comfort killers (also known as gain killers) may be a natural point of crossover for black widows killers who kill for financial gain; functionally, these black widow/comfort killers could be reclassified not as gold diggers, but as golden grave diggers. Lastly, Holmes and DeBurger note power/control killers. To some extent, this motivation may exist in all serial killers as killing is innately an act of taking control over another's body. However, in general, this motivation maps better on to Kelleher's angel of death category. In Nannie's case, a hybrid of black widow/mission-oriented or black widow/comfort killer is the most appropriate. Nannie could also be classified as both; unfortunately, the records which could have helped make a final distinction have been lost to time or do not exist.

### Aileen Wuornos: "Thanks a lot, society, for railroading my ass"

Aileen Carol Pittman was born on February 29th, 1956, in Rochester, Michigan, the daughter of Leo Dale Pittman and Diane Wuornos. Aileen's childhood was fragile. Her mother, a teen herself having married at 15, was largely incapable of taking responsibility over young Aileen and eventually abandoned her and her older brother Keith, leaving Aileen in the care of her grandparents, Lauri and Britta. Father Leo was out of the picture, but was known to be a child molester who hanged himself in prison in 1967 (Aileen Wuornos Childhood, n.d).

With both of her parents out of the picture, Aileen was raised by Lauri and Britta Wuornos, who convinced Aileen and her brother into thinking that they were in fact their biological parents. Lauri and Britta were not good parents; Lauri was physically and sexually abusive, while Britta was an abusive alcoholic. In Aileen's telling of her childhood, she had

sexual experiences with both Lauri and Keith. While Aileen repeatedly maintained in testimony and interviews that this abuse occurred, no corroboration or physical evidence supports it actually having happened. Regardless, at age 12 Aileen discovered the truth of her parentage, further sowing the seeds of what would ultimately happen. At age 14, Aileen got pregnant, supposedly from relations with her brother Keith, and was sent to a home for unwanted mothers, where she gave birth and put the child up for adoption (Aileen Wuornos Childhood).

Aileen returned home at which point Britta died of liver failure. Aileen's grandfather Lauri, now a widower, kicked Keith and Aileen out of the house, where they become wards of the state before Aileen ran away. In the following years, Keith died of throat cancer while Lauri committed suicide. Meanwhile, Aileen hitchhiked and prostituted herself out, eventually moving to Florida, where the then 20 year old met Lewis Fell, a 69 year old yacht club president. The two fell in love and married in 1976. Their relationship was tumultuous, mostly due to Aileen's abuses. Aileen mistreated Fell and eventually got into a series of bar fights, ending with a stint in jail, appalling Fell, who quickly realized his mistake and annulled the marriage (Aileen Wuornos Childhood).

Over the next ten years, Aileen was a prostitute and also dabbled in forgery, theft, armed robbery and assault. In 1986, Aileen met 24 year-old Tyria Moore at a gay bar in Daytona, beginning an intense and volatile four year relationship. Their relationship eventually ended, and Aileen returned to her solitary life of prostitution, vagrancy, and crime (Aileen Wuornos Childhood).

In 1989, Wuornos committed her first murder when she killed Richard Mallory after he picked her up hitchhiking. In interviews, Aileen claimed that she had killed Mallory in self defense after he tried to rape her. This could have been true, since Mallory did have a criminal

record for rape and a pattern of alcohol and sex binges. However, Aileen would later use this excuse numerous times to justify her murders. After shooting Mallory three times, Wuornos dumped the body and stole his car. Two weeks later, Mallory's naked body was discovered, although his murder would go unsolved for a year (Aileen Wuornos Murders, 2007).

Six months later, the body of David Spears was found naked, 40 miles north of Tampa, having been shot six times. By the time Spears was identified, a third victim, 40 year old rodeo worker Charles Carskaddon, was discovered in a state of extreme decomposition. After Carskaddon came delivery driver Eugene Burrell, former police chief Dick Humphreys, and lastly, truck driver Walter Antonio, whose body was discovered less than 24 hours after he had been shot three times in the back and once in the head (Aileen Wuornos Murders, 2007). The investigation began to gain steam as tips came in, pointing to a series of aliases. Eventually, investigators closed in on Aileen and another woman, Tyria Moore. Moore entered into a plea deal after admitting that she knew Aileen to be responsible for the murders. In her subsequent confessions, Aileen remained adamant that all seven murders were self-defense (Aileen Wuornos Murders).

After being convicted of one of the murders, Wuornos received six consecutive life terms. In an attempt to get the death penalty for Aileen, a state's attorney pushed for Aileen to be tried for the murder of Richard Mallory. Statements in that case from the medical examiner, Dr. Arthur Botting, indicated that Mallory had suffered greatly during the hours preceding his death. Tyria Moore, who testified that Aileen had contacted her the day of Mallory's murder, said that Wuornos had seemed sober and unemotional over Mallory's death. On the other hand, Wuornos' own expert witnesses testified that Wuornos suffered from BPD and had been severely mentally damaged by her abusive childhood, describing her as a "damaged, primitive child" (Aileen

Wuornos Murders). One expert testified that Wuornos lacked impulse control and had impaired cognition, while another expert opined that Wuornos believed that she was in imminent danger at the time of the murder, and that her remorse revealed she did not suffer from antisocial personality disorder. The State's expert, however, disagreed and found that Wuornos did exhibit antisocial personality disorder as well as BPD. A third expert, Dr. Bernard, agreed that Aileen was mentally disturbed at the time, but thought her impairment was insufficient to meet the legal definition of insanity. Still, Dr. Bernard acknowledged Wuornos' mental difficulties, alcoholism, disturbance, and genetic and environmental deficits (*Wuornos v. State*, 1994).

At the end of the trial, Aileen was found guilty, resulting in an outpouring of rage as she screamed "I'm innocent! I was raped! I hope you get raped! Scumbags of America!" (*Wuornos v. State*, 1994). In the aftermath, Aileen was sentenced to death in the electric chair. Two years into her wait on death row, Aileen admitted to reporter Claire Metz that she had killed her victims not in self defense, but in cold blood, saying, "I robbed them, and I killed them as cold as ice, and I would do it again, and I know I would kill another person because I've hated humans for a long time" (Aileen Carol Wuornos). This blunt self-assessment is far more likely than Aileen having fought off seven attempted rapists in the span of three years. In her final years, Aileen claimed to have become a born again Christian, noting that she "needed to die for the killing of those people" (*I Need to Die*, 2002). Despite her seeming acceptance of her fate, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty argued that Aileen's death sentence was deeply unfair. Citing her abusive childhood and her personality disorders, the Coalition encouraged the public to contact the state of Florida to reevaluate her sentence. In the end, however, Aileen was euthanized by lethal injection on October 9, 2002.

## Aileen the Anomaly: When typologies Fall Short

The case of Aileen Wuornos is, in a word, unusual. All the traits female serial killers are usually known for--killing family members or intimate acquaintances, victimizing those physically weaker than them, avoiding weapons like guns, impulsive killing--go out the window as soon as you look at even one of Aileen's murders. Aileen's case raises two distinct questions. First, are Aileen's killings just a freak abnormality *or*, could our current typologies be outdated? Second, is Aileen a just representative of the modern-day female serial killer?

While her case is statistically unusual, Aileen's case can be viewed as a distinct encroachment on traditional masculine violence, and in that sense Aileen can be considered to be a "liberated" female serial killer. Perhaps Aileen Wuornos represents the dawning of a new age of female serial killing marked by more apparent violence, an unfortunate side-effect of women's liberation. While this is perhaps speculative, from 1975 to 2015 we have seen a convergence between the rates of female and male killers. While the number of murders committed by both men and women are decreasing, male killings have decreased at a faster pace than those committed by females (Fox & Fridel, 2017). This may be because female killers are more likely to come from mentally ill, high risk population, which are not as strongly affected by the factors that otherwise reduce violence in society. However, it may also be true that as men cede control and even the gender playing field across society, some women may feel more inclined to break gender norms regarding violence. This may be supported by the fact that women are more likely than men to begin killing in their middle age, indicating that they are either more likely to experience late onset mental illness or triggering environmental factors, or that they are more likely to engage in some sort of escalation (or emancipation) to murder. Unfortunately, more detailed rates of female murder over time detailing differences in *modus operandi* haven't been

published. Therefore, it is hard to conclusively say whether or not Aileen is anomalous or a new breed of killer.

Regardless, it should be possible to attempt and categorize Aileen using existing typologies. Looking at the various typological systems there is no question that Aileen was disorganized. Her murders were highly impulsive, presumably brought about by her mental illness. She was neither particularly intelligent nor charming. Again, the disorganized/organized typology is useful here for distinguishing between broad differences in behavior, but fails to capture any sense of motivation.

Using the Holmes-DeBurger model, Aileen may qualify as a psychotic killer. On the other hand, while certainly deeply disturbed, Aileen was not truly at odds with reality, nor did she feel compelled by some supernatural entity to kill. Another option would be to classify Aileen as a hedonistic comfort killer, driven by a desire for money. However, while Aileen stole from her victims, it does not appear that money was her driving motivating factor. Alternatively, Aileen could be classified as a mission oriented killer if one believes that Aileen was killing out of a perceived need to defend herself. According to criminal experts on the CBS documentary, *Voice Of A Serial Killer*, Aileen may have been lashing out in anger at victims who remind her of her grandfather (Pike, 2018). While an imperfect substitute, her victims may have shared enough traits with her grandfather to serve as a stand in. Throughout the time of her murders Aileen was earning money as a prostitute so it is no surprise that her Johns would have treated her as a sexual object.

According to forensic psychologist Mike Barry, Aileen's victims were men in their 50s and 60s, "the age group who abused her earlier in her life. Whether they actually abused her or

not is debatable, but we're looking at her perception". With that in mind, I am inclined to categorize Aileen as a mission-killer, albeit an unusual one.

Using the Kelleher typology is unfortunately not particularly useful in understanding Aileen since she does not fit squarely into any particular category except "unexplained". If we accept Mike Barry's view that Aileen was acting out of anger against others, then Aileen may be a sort of pseudo-revenge killer. Alas, this is also an imperfect fit. Accordingly, it may be necessary to create a category of female serial killers specifically for cases of displaced anger or revenge against abusers.

## Chapter 4: A New Typology

Whether a new typology needs to exist is not necessarily clear. While typologies do have some interesting academic consequences, they are not particularly effective in helping the police catch serial killers. Nonetheless, in terms of understanding the causes of female perpetrated violence, a more rigorous typology needs to exist. To the extent that I can provide an outline for that typology, to be useful, typologies need to undergo statistical evaluation to determine if individuals really can be sorted into such categories.

If the Doss and Wuornos cases prove anything, it is that no single typology works perfectly. But a permutation of various typologies may be a useful tool in studying female serial killers. The disorganized/organized distinction is perhaps the least helpful in that the traits it specifies are often included in the types for both the motivational model and the Kelleher model. For that reason, in crafting my typology I will exclude the use of the disorganized/organized modality. Rather, I will look to combine the motivational and the Kelleher model where intersections exist, exclude permutations where they do not, and define common traits that may be present in these groups. I will also try to point out individuals who fit into these groups. I'm also excluding team killers as the addition of another person in the crimes may be confounding. I am also excluding unexplained cases in the hopes that in crossing the two typologies, I will remove the need for it. Nonetheless, in removing it I should note that certain categories (like MSBP) are displaced all together. Given the ultra specific nature of MSBP, it will not be crossed with the other categories at all and in the final list of typologies will remain its own distinct category.

For the hybridized categories that remain, I characterize them as either impossible (the two groups are completely incompatible), unlikely (the two groups may be compatible but it



would be highly specific to the individual), possible (the two groups are compatible and not necessarily highly specified, but may be particularly rare), likely (the two conditions are compatible and may naturally occur at a reasonable frequency), and identical (meaning for the sake of the new typology they will be functionally combined into one category).

	Questions of Sanity	Black Widow	Angel of Death	Sexual Predator	Revenge	Profit
<b>Visionary or Psychotic</b>	<p><u>Identical:</u> Both deal with cases of individuals who are psychotic or otherwise impaired. The crossover here is more in that they are near identical.</p> <p><i>Mass Murder Example: Andrea Yates (compelled by God to kill her children).</i></p>	<p><u>Impossible.</u> Black widows are highly organized and methodical, both of which are unlikely in cases of psychosis.</p>	<p><u>Impossible:</u> Angels of death are organized and usually need to be able to hold down a job in order to kill. This would be near impossible if someone was truly psychotic.</p>	<p><u>Possible:</u> It is possible that an individual could be compelled by visions or psychosis to engage in some sort of sexual aggression/ murder .</p> <p><i>Unknown if specific cases exist</i></p>	<p><u>Possible:</u> Revenge killers are explicitly driven by a need to seek vengeance. Visionary killers are usually driven by a need to satisfy a vision (such as visions of God).Hypothetically, visions could command one to seek revenge over and over against various individuals.</p> <p><i>Unknown if specific cases exist</i></p>	<p><u>Unlikely:</u> Profit driven kills require organization which is likely impossible for most psychotic killers.</p>
<b>Mission Oriented</b>	<p><u>Likely:</u> In some cases, it may be possible that an individual is driven by a moral mission or other dilemma which would compel an individual to kill, where the motivation is brought upon or made worse by severe mental illness.</p> <p><i>Male Example: Joseph P. Franklin (paranoid schizophrenic, white supremacist</i></p>	<p><u>Highly Likely:</u> Individual who would systematically kill their partners or family members because they were inferior to an ideal or fantasy. Driven not by money but by a desire to create an ideal family or punish family members who fail to meet expectations.</p>	<p><u>Possible:</u> Angel of Death who preys on the elderly or young for the purpose of expunging an ideal (youth) from society or for the purpose of expunging the decrepit (the elderly, sick or disabled)</p> <p><i>Unknown if specific cases exist.</i></p>	<p><u>Unlikely:</u> The motivation of killing for sexual gratification could be linked with the motivation of killing to remove a scourge on society This feels unlikely in that it would require the individual get sexual pleasure, especially given that female sexual predator serial killers are rare.</p>	<p><u>Likely:</u> These cases would be cases of displaced anger, where either the killings begin with the true target and later move on to a group associated with the first victim, or, where all victims as a surrogate allowing the killer to vent their rage.</p>	<p><u>Impossible:</u> Mission motivated killers are innately drawn to killing for the purpose or acting out against a specific group they deem dirty or inferior. Profit killers are motivated by cash or monetary value. Fundamentally, these two motivations appear irreconcilable.</p>

	<i>motivations)</i>	<i>Ex. Nannie Doss (see chapter 3)</i>			<i>Ex. Aileen Wuornos (see chapter 3)</i>	
<b>Hedonistic (lust/thrill/comfort)</b>	<p><u>Possible:</u> Killers with this crossover would have to be motivated to seek out sexual pleasure/thrill/ money due to some sort of psychosis e.g. [the devil “commanding” an individual to seek out violent sexual pleasure It is not particularly probably.</p> <p><i>Unknown if specific cases exist.</i></p>	<p><u>Likely:</u> Some black widow killers could naturally fit into the category of comfort killers if their motivation is monetary. It is also possible that a black widow killer could be motivated by more than money and gets either sexual gratification from killing their mate or thrill based satisfaction.</p> <p><i>Ex. English Black Widow, Mary Elizabeth Wilson</i></p>	<p><u>Likely:</u> Angels of Death have a certain shared victimology, but their motivations vary. Broadly speaking they often have some degree of a power fantasy, however, this is not mutually exclusive. Some Angels of Death may utilize this strategy in order to take advantage sexually or to get a rush they believe they can get away with.</p> <p><i>Sexual Angel of Death Ex. Jane Toppan, nurse</i></p>	<p><u>Likely/Identical:</u> In the case of lust oriented hedonist killers, their motivation is identical with that of sexual predators. At the same time, it is possible that someone could engage in sexual predation and killing for the sake of thrill, though it is unlikely that the same would be done as a comfort kill.</p> <p><i>Sexually/Lust Motivated Ex. Jeanne Weber</i></p>	<p><u>Unlikely:</u> Revenge killers are unlikely to be seeking sexual or thrill based release in killing. However, it is possible someone could kill for the sake of money if they felt they had been jilted. The reason this is unlikely for our purposes, however, is that it is improbable that such an individual would serial kill, rather it would occur as a one off.</p>	<p><u>Identical</u> Comfort Killings are naturally likely to be profit driven, thus the two can functionally be combined into a single non-hybridized category. It is unlikely, however, that a profit driven killer would also be lust/thrill driven.</p> <p><i>Ex. Dorothea Puente, killed tenants for social security checks</i></p>
<b>Power/control</b>	<p><u>Possible:</u> Individual could be driven by psychosis to seek out power. Delusion could drive them to kill in an effort to supernaturally enhance themselves or elevate themselves over their victim.</p> <p>Fictional male example: Francis Dolarhyde, <i>The Red Dragon</i></p>	<p><u>Possible:</u> For the most part black widow killers are driven by money, however, there could be a case where they are driven to kill in order to exert power in a male dominated home life. Alternatively, they could kill to remove competition and solidify control over other members of the family.</p> <p><i>Unknown if examples exist.</i></p>	<p><u>Likely:</u> Power fantasies often exist at the heart of angel of death cases. Women take advantage over the powerless in order to get a kind of rush.</p> <p>Ex. American nurse Kristen Gilbert</p>	<p><u>Likely:</u> Some cases of sexually aggressive murder may be driven by the female killer's need for control. Due to the infrequency of female sexual killers, this may be hard to distinguish, but could feasibly exist.</p> <p><i>Unknown if specific cases exist.</i></p>	<p><u>Unlikely:</u> In these cases, someone would enact murderous revenge in order to see their victim powerless and take control. While it is possible, it is unlikely that a revenge killer driven by a need for power over a victim would kill more than once and thus does not count towards the final typology.</p>	<p><u>Unlikely:</u> It is unlikely someone would kill for profit with the motivation of taking power over the other. While both can exist, one would not generally lead to the other so they are best left separate.</p>

## Hybridized Typology:

All identical, likely, and possible categories from the above analysis will be included in the final typology while the unlikely or impossible ones will not. In addition to the above categories, MSBP is included as it doesn't exhibit normal crossover with the other cases and is defined best by the DSM V without attaching modifiers. With that being said, the remaining categories for female serial killers are:

- Visionary/Psychotic/Questions of Sanity
  - Pure Psychotic/Visionary Killer
  - Visionary or Psychotic Sexual Predators
  - Visionary or Psychotic Revenge Killers
- Mission-Oriented
  - Pure Mission-Oriented
  - Psychotic (Questions of Sanity) Mission-Oriented
  - Mission-Oriented Black Widow
  - Mission-Oriented Angel of Death
  - Pseudo-Revenge Oriented (Mission-Oriented/Revenge)
- Hedonistic (lust)
  - Pure Lust-Oriented Killer
  - Lust-Oriented Psychotic Killer
  - Lust-Oriented Black Widow
  - Lust-Oriented Angel of Death
- Hedonistic (thrill)

- Pure Thrill-Oriented Killer
- Thrill-Oriented Psychotic Killer
- Thrill-Oriented Black Widow
- Thrill-Oriented Angel of Death
- Hedonistic (comfort)
  - Pure Profit Killer
  - Psychotic Comfort Killer
  - Comfort-Oriented Black Widow
- Power/Control
  - Psychotic Power/Control Killer
  - Power-Oriented Black Widows
  - Power-Oriented Angel of Death Killer
  - Power-Oriented Revenge Killer
  - Power-Oriented Sexual predator
- Munchausen's by Proxy

Ultimately, while this list may not be exhaustive, it still does a better job than previous typologies at delineating between motivation. Moreover, in combining the existing typologies one has to refer to fewer references in establishing which type fits a given individual.

Unfortunately, this typology is necessarily longer and loses some of the more “media-friendly” distinctions. Nonetheless, for studying female serial killers it could prove a helpful tool in distinguishing characteristics between the different types, and thus in pointing to factors that may cause those kind of killers to develop.

The other important thing about this typology is that it could be tested not only with women but also with men. While certain types appear far less frequently in men (e.g., black widows) and certain types are far less frequent in women (ex. sexual predators) the overall system could be applied to categorize both. If it were to be fully applicable to men, however, additional categories would likely need to be added outside of the Kelleher categories which applied specifically to male killers.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

Women are not uniquely violent. Rather, a number of factors contribute to female violence. The various permutation of risk factors add up, and in some individuals produce

murderers and in others meek victims. Risk factors are ultimately not enough to force anyone to murder. There is no single bullet or factor to explain behavior.

Instead, it may be more effective to imagine violence and the mind as a bathtub. With each risk factor, the bath may fill a little with violent impetus; mental illness, childhood abuse, brain injury. Even so, the violence is contained, maybe it is even drained through therapy, treatment, or positive role models. In some people, however, the tub just keeps filling as the risk factors accumulate until it spills over. The size of the splash may vary, but ultimately someone gets wet in the aftermath.

Society may view murders as a male activity, but ultimately both men and women kill, and serial killers can be either male or female. Psychological research has historically tended to overlook how men and women respond differently, and for that reason our understanding of female killers is limited. Nonetheless, with a rigid typology in place, it may be possible to start looking at female killers more scientifically. Examining psychological, biological, and environmental factors related to specific killers and tracking them onto a typological system, we may discover patterns previously unknown. Moreover, we may be able to find places of commonality with male killers, and places of distinction. To that end, it may be easier to study these acts of terrible human violence from a systematic standpoint.

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## Biography

Tori W. Rose was born in Park Ridge, Illinois, on November 29, 1996, and grew up in Northbrook, Illinois. She enrolled in the Plan II Honors program at the University of Texas at Austin in 2015, and graduated in May 2019 with degrees in Plan II and government as well as a minor in psychology. In college, she was a tutor through Plan Tutoring for the KIPP Schools of Austin. She also was the technical director and stage manager for a number of theater productions at UT-Austin's Creative Arts + Theater program. In the Fall of 2019, Tori will be starting at the Gould School of Law at the University of Southern California.